In the summer of 1938 J. Maclaren-Ross lunched at Greene’s Queen Anne house on the north side of Clapham Common. He was twenty-six and had come to ask Greene’s permission to adapt *A Gun For Sale* for the radio. As they walked across the common to the pub, probably the one Greene used in *The End of the Affair*, Maclaren-Ross told him that he also sold vacuum cleaners. ‘Greene . . . halted abruptly and turned to take a good look at me,’ Maclaren-Ross remembers. ‘“Vacuum cleaners?”’ Greene asked, waiting attentively for details about the pay and the job. ‘“I thought of signing on myself at one time. To write a book about it afterwards of course. I never knew one could actually sell the things.’”¹

About ten years later Alberto Cavalcanti asked Greene for a screenplay and the idea of writing a Secret Service comedy took hold. It eventually became *Our Man In Havana* (1958) but Greene first set his story in 1938 in Tallinn, Estonia. His original protagonist had nothing to do with vacuum cleaners and it was the extravagance of a wife, not a daughter, that made his agent cheat the Service. The Cavalcanti film was never made but Greene remembered his idea for it, and Maclaren-Ross’s vacuum cleaners, years later in Cuba, which he first visited in 1954 between his third and fourth trips to Vietnam. The circumstances of that visit were humorous enough to have been included in any Cold War comedy.

On his way home from Haiti, where he had been on holiday with Peter Brook and Truman Capote, he was scheduled to change planes in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and again in New York. The American Ambassador in Port-au-Prince told him he could do this without a visa, provided he agreed to remain in locked rooms between planes. It was the fastest way to London and the only way possible for Greene, who was still a restricted visitor to the US. But in Puerto Rico the immigration authorities put him
on a plane back to Haiti. Greene tried to confuse things by confessing at the last minute that he had no visa but one was obtained and he was forced to go. In the air the captain came to talk to him. He had been a communist and an actor who had been driven out of Hollywood. He defended Greene when the Delta manager in Port-au-Prince wanted to send him home through Jamaica, and took him on to Cuba. Greene made sure the story got into the international papers, but the police in Havana never found him. They 'were not very efficient in the days of Batista,' he says.

He returned many times 'for the sake of the Floridita restaurant (famous for daiquiris and Morro crabs), for the brothel life, the roulette in every hotel, the fruit-machines spilling out jack-pots of silver dollars, the Shanghai Theatre where for one dollar twenty-five cents one could see a nude cabaret of extreme obscenity with the bluest of films in the intervals.' Until he began to plan *Our Man In Havana*, he was unaware of the imprisonment and torture that went on in the background of the Havana he enjoyed. He never travelled to the interior and knew no Cubans well. Only when it struck him that he might set his Secret Service comedy in Batista's Havana 'where every vice was permissible and every trade possible,' did he begin to explore the country.

When he made trips around the island in 1957 he felt very close to the 26 July Movement. He took a suitcase of sweaters and heavy socks from Havana to Santiago for Castro's men in the surrounding mountains. He met Haydee Santa Maria whose fiancé had been murdered by Batista's police and her husband, Armando Hart, a lawyer who became Minister of Education and then Minister of Culture in Castro's government. On subsequent visits Greene met many of the Revolution's heroes including Fidel Castro, with whom he spoke in 1966 and 1983.

In London he was able to help the Revolution by having a sympathetic Labour MP ask embarrassing questions about the British government's involvement with the Batista regime, and by writing letters to *The Times*. Two days after Castro entered Havana in triumph, Greene informed the British public that their government had been allowing turbo-jets and tanks to be sent to Batista while his leading police officers were torturing and killing hostages. Without the intervention of Mr Hugh Delargy in the House of Commons, Greene said the British government would have gone on supplying Batista to the end. In February 1962 when the United States urged NATO countries to help